KING-NASH HOUSE

3234 WEST WASHINGTON BOULEVARD
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
SUBMITTED TO THE COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL AND
ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS
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KING-NASH HOUSE
3234 West Washington Boulevard
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1901

Architect: George W. Maher

The Patrick J. King-Patrick A. Nash House, designed in 1901 by George W. Maher, is located in the section of Chicago's West Side known as East Garfield Park. The house exemplifies an important aspect of the historical heritage of the city via its ownership from 1925 to '43 by Patrick A. Nash, the Irish Catholic politician who resided there during the height of his prominence in municipal governmental affairs. As the work of George W. Maher, its architectural significance is unquestionable. Considered one of the most inventive and prolific of the Prairie school architects working primarily in the period 1890-1914, Maher's influence on the Midwest has been described as both profound and prolonged. The King-Nash House has been identified by the Chicago Historic Resources Survey as being of particular merit.

East Garfield Park

In the 1890s and early 1900s, West Washington Boulevard was regarded as one of the city's most fashionable addresses, and the wide tree-lined artery was banded by spacious single-family residences. Those who lived there had an added advantage in the proximity of beautiful Garfield Park. First known as Central Park, the 187-acre park was laid out in 1869 by noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead as part of the city's circumferential system of parks and boulevards. Recreational life in the area pivoted around the buccolic atmosphere of this park. Now referred to as the community area of East Garfield Park, this part of Chicago's West Side had remained prairie and farmland until well into the 1860s. Annexation to the city took place in 1869 by an act of the state legislature. The years of accelerated growth were between 1885 and 1914 as elevated lines and electric surface lines replaced the horse-drawn car lines, at one time reputed to be the slowest in

the city. The population was characterized by a large component of Irish, along with Germans, Russian Jews, and Italians.

The Architect George Maher

Built by wealthy businessman Patrick J. King in 1901 for $18,000, the King-Nash House exhibits all the salient elements which make Maher's residential style so distinctive. George Washington Maher was born on Christmas Day, 1864, in Mill Creek, West Virginia. His family later moved to New Albany, Indiana, where he was educated in the public schools. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed as a draftsman in the Chicago architectural office of Augustus Bauer and Henry Hill. Later Maher entered the office of Joseph Silsbee, an employment opportunity which would prove to be of cardinal importance for Maher's career. Silsbee's office was an early training ground for several reknowned Prairie school architects, and it was in this office that Maher came into contact with such talented young men as Frank Lloyd Wright and George Grant Elmslie. After a brief association with Cecil Corwin, Maher established an independent practice in 1893. That same year, other important events occurred in Maher's life. A severe nervous disorder that would continue to plague him throughout his life, necessitated recuperation abroad, a period which certainly benefited and broadened Maher's architectural education. Also in 1893, Maher married Elizabeth Brooks, daughter of Alden Brooks, a local Chicago portraitist. For his new bride, Maher built a residence on Warwick Avenue in Kenilworth, Illinois, which was to be their home for the remainder of their lives. In 1894, their only child, Philip Brooks Maher, was born. Later, Philip would join his father's firm and, indeed, went on to establish his own noteworthy practice in Chicago. The Maher family was continually active in the social and civic affairs of Kenilworth with Maher serving as both a trustee of the village and a park commissioner. He belonged to the Union League Club, the Chicago Athletic Association, and the American Institute of Architects, serving as president of the Illinois Chapter in 1918. He was a leading figure in the Chicago Architectural Club which was the representative organization of the Prairie school movement. Unfortunately, during the 1920s Maher's physical and mental health rapidly deteriorated and regrettably, he took his own life on September 12, 1926, at his summer home in Douglas, Michigan.

Throughout his career the majority of Maher's work was residential. As a result of his social contacts and club memberships, as well as through his own business acumen and adroit salesmanship, Maher received numerous commissions from important figures in Chicago's prosperous business community for substantial homes in the suburbs along Chicago's North Shore. Another major concentration of Maher's houses is in Oak Park, Illinois and within Chicago along Hutchinson Street (designated a Chicago Landmark in 1977). Of his non-residential work, two important examples are Northwestern University's Patten Gymnasium (now demolished) and the Swift Hall of Engineering, both constructed 1908-9. Maher was also commissioned by Northwestern to prepare a comprehensive campus plan which, while never executed, has been lauded for its harmonization of the buildings with the characteristic local shoreline landscape. A bank building and an administration building for the J. R. Watkins Medical Company, both in Winona, Minne-

sota, are further examples of Maher's commercial designs. Community planning was also a paramount concern and intense interest of Maher, and he was active in projects in Glencoe, Kenilworth, and Hinsdale, Illinois, all three relating to the downtown and railroad station areas of these villages. In his final years, Maher was active in promoting the preservation of Charles Atwood's Fine Arts Building, which had been an integral part of the 1893 Columbian Exhibition, and its conversion into the Museum of Science and Industry.

George W. Maher was both a part of and a participant in what during the years 1890-1914 was a worldwide burgeoning of new ideas and techniques in residential architecture and interior design. Simultaneously, the American Prairie and Craftsman schools, the English Arts and Crafts movement, the Austrian Secession, the Scottish Glasgow school and similar movements in Scandinavia and the Netherlands were blazing a trail away from Victorian historicism to a new honesty and fitness of purpose which embraced new styles, forms, and materials. A review of Maher's work in the March, 1914 issue of *The Western Architect* summarized Maher's part in this revolution:

> Mr. Maher is not an apostle of a new cult or even expressing a new theory but is one in a world-wide movement of democracy in design that, breaking away from a parasitic, imitative and devitalized art in every country from Finland to Scotland and Germany to America, is seeking to meet modern conditions with modern design. He is one of that constantly increasing number that are seeking for a logical expression of modern thought to meet modern conditions, particularly in the honest use of materials in a building and a candid acknowledgement of purpose in each design. Relegating the orders to the classroom and drawing inspiration from the splendid works that have endured with time, those apostles of a new architectural epoch are using this heritage of the past as an inspiration that is as alive as the concrete form is dead in relation to modern requirements in purpose and form.

Maher's lifelong ambition was to create an indigenous American architectural style, one which would reflect, he hoped, American democracy and the cult of the individual. Maher had very well thought out views on architecture which he elaborated in 1887 in a paper titled "Originality in American Architecture." In it Maher expresses admiration for H. H. Richardson who he thought had achieved the idea "of massiveness, imposing centralization, of grouping novel ideas for comfort in the interior arrangement [of residences]." Maher was also impressed with the symmetrical formality of Colonial revival architecture.

Throughout his career, Maher's residential designs frequently suggested the character of Frank Lloyd Wright's 1893 design for the Winslow House in River Forest, Illinois. Maher's residential designs up until 1910 often reflected the broad horizontal character of the Winslow House, with strongly rectilinear massing, broken by a symmetrical placement of rectangular or square openings centered on a prominently expressed central entry. An important early example of Maher's work in this style was the John Farson House, erected in 1897 in Oak Park, Illinois.

Early in his career, Maher also developed what he described as his "motif-rhythm theory." Although Maher was not alone in his single motif concept, he used it to a somewhat greater extent than any other architect of the period, and it became a unique and highly personal characteristic of his work. Architectural historian J. William Rudd explains:

> His development of the "motif-rhythm theory" was achieved by choosing a plant indigenous to the area and/or a specific geometric shape as the unifying motif within which the various elements of the composition were to subordinately relate.

Notable examples of this include the 1901 James A. Patten House in Evanston, Illinois (now demolished) where thistle was used repeatedly as the singular decorative pattern; the 1902 Harry Rubens House in Glencoe, Illinois where the hollyhock dominates; and the 1908 E. J. Magerstadt House in Chicago's Kenwood neighborhood where the poppy enhances one of Maher's most acclaimed commissions. As Maher himself explained it:

> Ornament should be identified with some floral element of the locality to which it is confined, recognizing that the leading flower of a neighborhood is nature's symbol of the spirit breathed there.

From 1904 onwards Maher's work reveals the increasing influence of European designers of the period. Architectural historian H. Allen Brooks states that, "by eclecticism Maher endeavored to combine the best that contemporary European architecture had to offer, hoping to produce something personal and substantially new." It was not unusual to find an American Midwest architect such as George Maher subject to the impact of the European vanguard. A variety of progressive architectural periodicals criss-crossed between Europe and America documenting the new visual concepts, and the designers themselves travelled and taught, wrote and exhibited. Although most architectural historians classify George W. Maher as a Prairie school architect, his openess and receptivity to other influences means that his work as a whole does not fall strictly within that stylistic framework. Prairie school elements are certainly discernible in his work, but other themes are strongly evident as well, and the best of his work is the synthesis of all of these into a highly personal style.

The King-Nash House

Constructed of rough cut and finished grey Bedford stone, the King-Nash House is a neatly and simply composed three-story structure facing south onto Washington Boulevard. A restrained and austere design, this residence bespeaks Maher's acknowledgement of the Colonial revival style which he greatly admired. In the early 1900s, architects working in the Colonial revival rarely used exact historical quotations but instead freely interpreted details inspired by Colonial precedents. In the King-Nash House, the hipped roof interrupted midway with an arched dormer over Palladian windows, the full width porch

and centered entrance are all to be found in traditional Colonial architecture. The influence of the then-contemporary Prairie school is shown in the way the house is carefully and harmoniously wedded to its site by means of wide shallow steps flanked by flattened pedestal urns. It was characteristic of all of Maher's work to always tie a building with its surroundings whether circumscribed city lot or expansive suburban acreage. Massive masonry pilasters anchor the corners of the house and contain the three dominant horizontal planes of the facade. This emphatic horizontality, again a characteristic of the Prairie school, was meant to reflect the flat Midwest terrain on which Prairie school residences were built. The vertical line of the piers is reiterated at each level by columns supporting the porch and columns centralized at the second and third stories. The repetitive pattern of vertical elements bounded by strong horizontal lines is a typical Prairie school trait. Also entirely characteristic of George Maher is the centralized plan, an element of Maher's designs often cited for its spacious comfort and conduciveness to gracious living. The King-Nash House furnishes a very apt illustration of Maher's ability to assimilate a number of themes into his own personal expression, displaying an adventuresome spirit yet never appearing unorthodox or impractical. He was always keenly attuned to his client's wants and needs.

Just as the Prairie school residence was well integrated with the natural setting of its site, so too was the interior and exterior decoration of the house in keeping with the premise of a new approach unshackled from historicism, superfluous ornament, or Victorian gimmickry. In carrying out this ideal, Maher, in common with many of his Prairie school colleagues, was strongly influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement in England and was himself one of the founding members of a Chicago Arts and Crafts Society in 1895. The goal of this movement was the resurrection of the once valued and commonplace art of fine hand-wrought craftsmanship, a commodity being displaced by the mass-produced and machine-made products of the Industrial Revolution. Architects particularly were interested in employing skilled plasterers, painters, carvers, sculptors, and artisans of stained and ornamental glass to enrich their work.

The extension of the Arts and Crafts philosophy can be seen in the distinctive decorative accentuations both within and without the King-Nash House. Ornament based not on traditional historical patterns but derived from the naturalistic vernacular of flora and fauna is used on column capitals and also spans the arch of the dormer. In keeping with Maher's "motif-rhythm theory," the thistle, an intensely purplish-blue colored flower with prickly leaves, is used here and throughout the interior of the house in a variety of decorative treatments. The strong silhouette of this prairie flower can be seen inlaid in the vividly hued and finely detailed ceramic floors and, in a more dimensional fashion, in remaining sections of the plaster wall trim. It was once found stencilled on flat wall surfaces, now painted over.

A particularly luxuriant material used in the King-Nash House was glass mosaic, often incorporating the same thistle motif. On the outside of the house were three glass panels used as spandrels separating the second-story windows. No longer in the King-Nash House and now in the collection of the Whitney Museum in New York City is a glass mosaic fire-

place facing. As Sharon Darling explains in her 1979 publication, *Chicago Ceramics and Glass: An Illustrated History from 1871-1933:*

> Glass mosaic fireplace facings frequently formed an integral part of the highly individualized and carefully integrated residences designed by Prairie school architect George W. Maher. . .
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> When glass mosaics were at the height of their popularity, several Chicago firms began creating elaborate glass mosaic fireplace facings for expensive residences and private clubs. Composed of iridescent or foil-backed tesserae, the glass mosaic facings sparkled when struck by sunlight or shimmered magnificently in firelight. They were used in conjunction with art glass windows or bookcase lights, repeating theme, color, and materials to further unify interiors of residences designed by architects, particularly those associated with the progressive Prairie school.

Also noteworthy in the King-Nash House were dining room windows. Now in the collection of the Chicago Historical Society, they featured imposing stylized thistles resplendent in luminous stained glass. It is quite probable that all the mosaic and glass work was done by the masterful and admired Chicago decorative designer Louis J. Millet whom Maher commissioned to execute the interior work on the James A. Patten House in Evanston, Illinois, constructed simultaneously with the King-Nash House.

A native of New York City and a nephew of the French sculptor Aime Millet, Louis J. Millet (1855-1923) studied architecture and decoration at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. While there he met George L. Healy, son of G. P. A. Healy, the prominent Chicago portrait painter. The two teamed together to open a decorating establishment in Chicago in 1880. The firm enjoyed instant success and was applauded for employing new techniques and novel designs for frescoes, stained glass, mosaic glass, and other custom decorations. Examples of their work include the Auditorium (1889); McVicker's Theater (1891; demolished); the Schiller Theater (1892; demolished); the Chicago Stock Exchange (1894; demolished); and Fullerton Memorial Hall at the Art Institute (1897). From 1886 until 1918 Millet was associated with the Art Institute of Chicago, founding its Department of Decorative Design. Although the partnership of Healy & Millet ended in 1899, Millet continued to execute superb designs on his own. During 1903-04 he served as chief of mural and decorative painting for the St. Louis World's Fair. He also assisted Louis Sullivan, a longtime friend and partron, with the interior decoration of banks in Owatonna, Minnesota (1908) and Sidney, Ohio (1918).

Patrick A. Nash and the Irish Catholics in Chicago

Other than his name, address, and undoubtedly lucrative occupation, not a great deal of information can be found on Patrick J. King, the original owner and builder of the house at 3234 West Washington Boulevard. However, for eighteen years, the house was

owned and occupied by an extremely influential and eminent Chicago politician, Patrick A. Nash. This man's life and work can be seen as exemplifying the role played by the Irish Catholics in shaping the government of Chicago. Patrick A. Nash was the son of Thomas Nash (1826-1928) who was superintendent of construction for the first water intake tunnels in Lake Michigan. The senior Nash, who immigrated to Chicago in 1856, later founded the Nash Construction Company with his sons Patrick and Richard. It was this company that was awarded the very lucrative contract to build city sewers. The professional occupation of the Nash family typifies the working experience of a majority of Irish Catholic newcomers, as historian Ellen Skerrett explains in the recently published *From Paddy to Studs: Irish Catholic Communities in the Turn of the Century Era, 1880-1920:*

> The Chicago Fire of 1871 which began in the rear of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary's barn on Dekoven Street had long-term consequences for the city's Irish, then estimated at more than forty thousand. With nearly four square miles of the city leveled, the demand for Irish labor was unprecedented. By the mid-1870s, Irish contractors were making fortunes as a new modern city rose from the ashes of the fire. . .
>
> In addition to the erection of a new business district, Chicago was expanding outward. By the 1880s, streetcar lines criss-crossed the city providing the Irish with yet another source of employment. New residential sections required sidewalks, sewers, gas, electric, and telephone lines, endeavors in which the Irish were conspicuous. As the city's population increased to more than a million in 1890 so did the demand for policemen and firemen. The Irish dominated both departments and for most of the next century, the Chicago Police Force and Fire Department remained largely Irish institutions.

It was precisely through such vehicles as municipal employment that the Irish would achieve dominance in city government. Furthermore, a number of peculiarly ethnic attributes contributed to their success, as Paul Michael Green explains in Holli and Jones' 1984 *Ethnic Chicago:*

> Obviously, the Irish had great advantages for their climb up the political ladder. They arrived early and with enormous number in Chicago and were able to speak the English language. . .It took Chicago's Irish four decades before they were able to break through the bigotry barrier and begin to make real political waves in the city. With a chance for full political involvement, the Irish were then able to use their personality traits and customs brought over from Ireland to gain political power. . .
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> Living under a long-imposed feudal system in Ireland, the Irish became a people who placed great emphasis on unflinching loyalty and uses of political influence. In Ireland, families and clans, not national allegiance, were

> the unifying elements among the people. . . .The Irish peasant's old beliefs in clan allegiance and chief loyalty remained untouched, but his political involvement shifted from feudal isolation to representative politics. . . In combining old-world traditions with new-world democracy, the Irish developed a unique political personality among Chicago's inhabitants.

Long aligned with the Democrats, the Irish gradually rose to become major catalysts and power brokers within this American political party. In the beginning, the successful prototypical Irish politician was the neighborhood saloonkeeper. Easily accessible to the people and identifying with their immediate needs, these men were most skillful in servicing the party at the ward level, and included such colorful and reputedly crooked characters as Michael "Hinky-Dink" Kenna and John "Bathhouse" Coughlin. However, by the turn of the century, a new kind of Irish political operative was coming to the fore, that of the "businessman-politician." These new entrepreneurs were better educated, less flamboyant, more wily and sophisticated than the oldtime working-class neighborhood bosses. Most especially they sought wealth, power, prestige, and patronage of the blossoming politically related businesses such as construction, utilities, and transportation. While never disdaining their Irishness, this new breed concentrated on organization orientation, not ethnicity. It is in this mode that Patrick Nash best fits.

Born in 1863, Nash grew up on the city's West Side, living in the predominantly Irish Fourteenth Ward. His mentor was his next-door neighbor, Democratic kingpin Roger Sullivan. This contract not only bolstered Nash's business fortunes but also insured his political advancement as well. By 1920, Nash was one of the wealthiest men in the city as well as a permanent fixture among Democratic party stalwarts. Nash was principally a behind-the-scenes man, one whose advice and counsel was sought by the publicly acknowledged leaders such as George Brennan and Anton Cermak. As Paul Michael Green explains.

> Pat Nash was a political craftsman, but he possessed little of the saloonkeeper-politician's rougish charm. He was not politically lovable, nor did he engender great personal loyalty from his supporters. Instead, Nash acted as a corporation board chairman, and in this position he molded an effective and efficient Democratic organization beyond the saloonkeeper's wildest dreams.

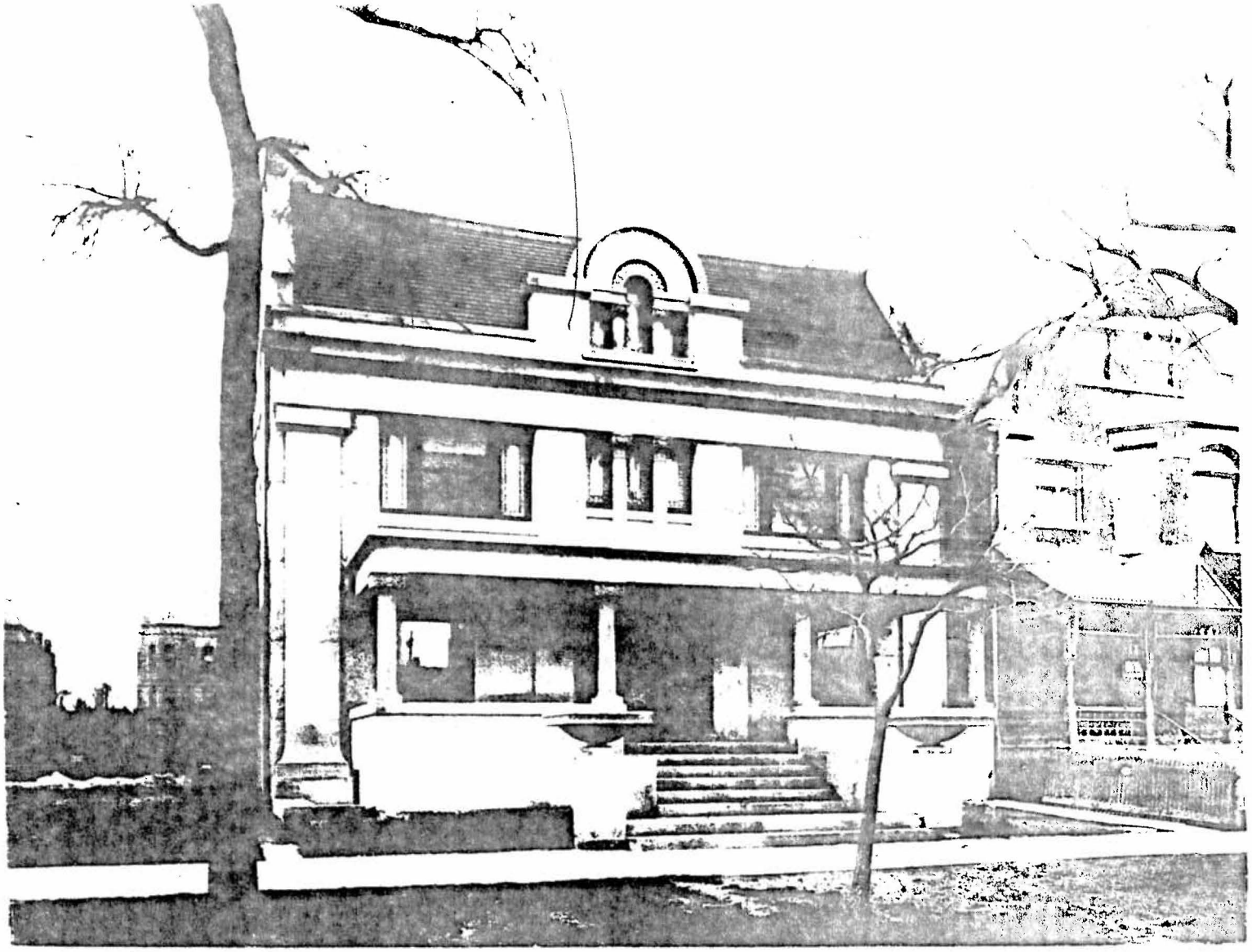
After being elected mayor in 1931, Cermak selected Pat Nash to replace himself as the chairman of the Cook County Democratic Central Committee, a position which in effect gave Nash the day-to-day responsibility and control of party affairs. In 1933, Cermak was accidentally shot to death by an assassin aiming at Franklin D. Roosevelt. In the intense manuvering that followed Cermak's death, it was Pat Nash who successfully orchestrated the selection of former Sanitary District Engineer Edward J. Kelly as the new mayor. This marked the founding of the nationally recognized "Kelly-Nash machine" and the beginning of Democratic machine control of Chicago's city government. The power and sway of this political phenomenon lasted well into the early 1980s, reaching its pinnacle during the twenty-year tenure of Mayor Richard J. Daley. Patrick Nash lived at 3234 West Wash-

ington Boulevard from 1925 until his death in 1943. Thus the house is closely identified with a legendary figure whose key role in city government must be factored into any study of municipal history.

In 1887, George Maher wrote:

> America is noted for its character of progress since first it was settled in modern times. To the present day the people's tendency has been towards that which is an improvement upon old European methods and forms.

Both Patrick A. Nash and George W. Maher were typically American in their pursuit of "an improvement upon old European methods and forms," the one in politics, the other in architecture. Just as descendents of Irish Catholic immigrants like Pat Nash searched for acceptance in the American political system, so too did the new breed of architects like George Maher seek an acceptable form of American architecture. The King-Nash House is intimately associated with two Americans both of whom aspired to realize the quintessential American dream, and thus the house has significant value in the cultural development and historic heritage of Chicago.



Shortly after its completion, the King-Nash House was pictured in the May, 1902 issue of *The Inland Architect and News Record.*

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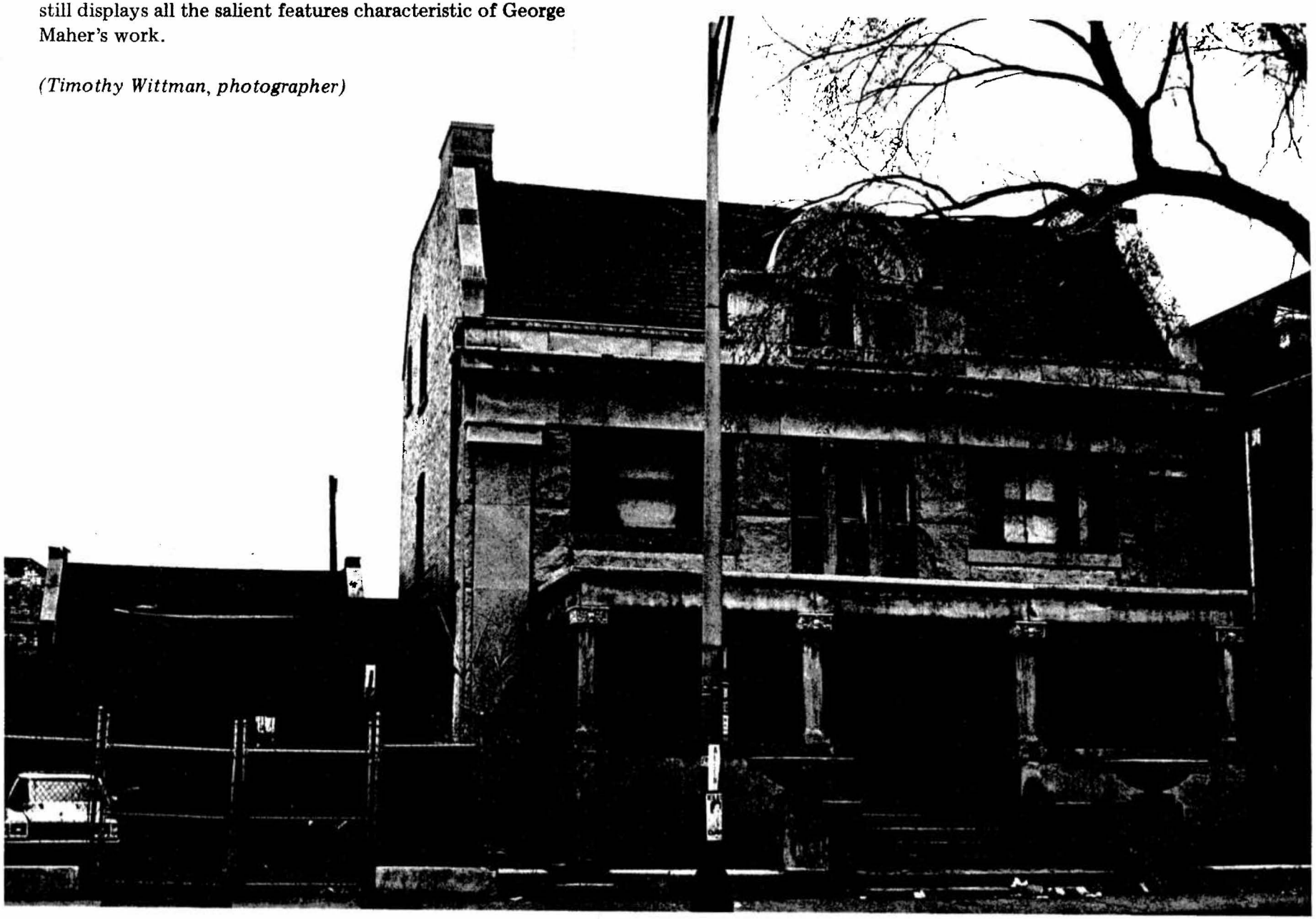
Despite various changes in ownership and use, the King-Nash House today retains a high degree of integrity and still displays all the salient features characteristic of George Maher's work.

(Timothy Wittman, photographer)



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